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ABSTRACT

This paper makes three arguments reaffirming the overwhelming complexities inherent in any real history of the language of blacks in North America. (1) Although the study of black English, however that term may be defined, is desirable in itself and was profitable for white linguists during the 1960s and early 1970s, it did not and never will do much to improve conditions of life among speakers of the dialect or dialects so called. State supported schools support the state, and state supported research supports the state and the researchers. (2) The opposition between creolist and dialectologist, which remains the best known product of the mainly white black-English industry, is an obstructive oversimplification of a complex history. (3) Positions called "creolist" have commonly been stated more confidently than the evidence can justify, so that in the popular mind a definition of black English as a "family of creole-based dialects" is often accepted as past question or refinement; but a better point of departure for further study would be a careful distinction between assertion and established fact and an actively inquiring agnosticism where fact is not established.
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From Black-White Speech Relationships to the Ethnography
of Communication; or, Who Profits from Research?

James Sledd

This paper makes three arguments:

1. Although the study of Black English (however Black English may be defined) is desirable in itself and was profitable for white linguists during the sixties and the early seventies, it did not and never will do much to improve conditions of life among speakers of the dialect or dialects so called. State-supported schools support the state, and state-supported research supports the state and the researchers.

2. The opposition between creolist and dialectologist which remains the best known product of the mainly white Black English industry is an obstructive oversimplification of a complex history.

3. Positions called creolist have commonly been stated more confidently than the evidence can justify, so that in the popular mind a definition of Black English as a "family of Creole-based dialects"¹ is often accepted as past question or refinement; but

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CS206/62

~~It is~~ a better point of departure for further study would be a careful distinction between assertion and established fact and an actively inquiring agnosticism where fact is not established.

Those arguments are developed in the sequence 2, 3, 1. Primary examples are from a typescript read by Ralph Fasold at last spring's meeting of the Southeastern Conference on Linguistics, "The Relation between Black and White Speech in the South."² Secondary examples are from J. L. Dillard's revision of Marckwardt's American English³ and from Dillard's anthology Perspectives on American English.⁴ The present paper implies reaffirmation of a judgment passed ten years ago:

From the beginning, different Blacks achieved quite different levels of proficiency in quite different kinds of English; and a real history of the English of North American Negroes, if it can ever be written, must not be a simple tale either of British folk speech in the New World or of creoles gradually assimilated to the standard language, but must do justice to the most overwhelming complexities.⁵

Argument 2. Ralph Fasold must not be held responsible for the blank opposition of creolist to dialectologist, which he did not invent; but he states the opposition in the way most certain to perpetuate it, as a matter of yes or no to just two questions: (a) Even in the South, is the speech of blacks very different from the speech of otherwise comparable whites? (b) Has "modern Black English" developed "by decreolization" from "a Plantation Creole spoken in the ante-bellum South by slaves, but not to any significant degree by whites"?⁶ According to Fasold, only two positions of the four that he calls possible are actually taken on these matters, either yes to both questions or no to both.⁷

If such neat contrariousness did, however, condemn all scholars to one or the other of just two warring camps, there would be no place either for cautious elders who find "virtue and also logic in both points of view" concerning the history of Black English⁸

or for agnostic spectators who are vexed by misleading questions and immoderate answers. Fasold's own moderate answers would themselves be impossible, since his yes to the question of difference is qualified by the phrase "to some degree"⁹ and his yes to the question of a creole history is given in terms of likelihood, not certainty.¹⁰

Fasold ought simply to have denied the polar opposition of dialectologists to creolists, which makes sense only as a clash of academic vanities and ambitions. The speech of neither blacks nor whites, either in the old South or in the nation generally, has ever been really homogeneous, so that the inferences possible from comparisons must vary with the dialects compared; and it is not the existence of an African element in American English which has been debated, but the nature of that element and the mode of its transmission, which cannot be described in a vocabulary of the four terms pidgin, creole, standard, and decreolization.

Argument 3. Though Fasold himself inclines to accept a creole history, he now specifically refuses to argue¹¹ from eighteen of the features which have been named as characteristics of "Vernacular Black English."¹² Several of those eighteen appeared in the familiar list, "Some Linguistic Features of Negro Dialect," which Fasold and Walt Wolfram prepared for teachers ten years ago.¹³

Today Fasold makes a two-part argument--first, but briefly, from the glottalized final [t] in stressed syllables like bed, the high frequency of s-less forms in the third singular present, and the absence of the s-ending from "all types of plural nouns," though most frequently from nouns of measure.¹⁴ No large conclusions can be based on such small evidence. Since voiced final stops are often devoiced in white Southern speech while voiceless final stops are often glottalized there, the pronunciation of bed which Fasold cites as black could be explained by simple ordering of the rule for final glottalization after the rule for final devoicing (that is, by treating all final [t]'s alike); and the other two features involve only the frequency or generality with which shared rules take

effect, not totally different rules.

Fasold argues at more length from five other features allegedly distinctive of "Vernacular Black English": (1) "absence of the possessive suffix" of nouns and "other evidence" of its "incomplete mastery,"¹⁵ (2) "completive been," or the been of "remote aspect,"¹⁶ (3) simplification of the final clusters $-\text{[sp]}$, $-\text{[st]}$, and $-\text{[sk]}$,¹⁷ (4) deletion not just of are but of is too as copula and auxiliary,¹⁸ and (5) "distributive be."¹⁹

Even a brief examination shows that these arguments ^{also} ~~too~~ are [^]inconclusive.

(1) Just four randomly chosen pages²⁰ of the diary of the undertaker Henry Machyn in mid-sixteenth-century London provide endless possessives of the nouns alderman, Kay (a proper name), Lady, queen, and ship; seventy-five years ago Joseph Wright reported that "the sign of the genitive, both singular and plural, is generally omitted when one noun qualifies another in all the north Country dialects and occasionally in the north Midlands";²¹ and morphological maps 65 and 66 in Orton's Linguistic Atlas show endless

possessives still surviving in phrases like my father boots and the cow legs in substantial areas of Yorkshire, Lancashire, and Westmorland.²² Wakelin offers other instances.²³

(2) Citing a manuscript version of the article by Robin Hern-dobler and Andrew Sledd, "Black English--Notes on the Auxiliary,"²⁴ Fasold himself admits that the history of completive or "perfective" been remains "confused and obscure."²⁵

(3) More precisely than he and Wolfram did in Social Dialects,²⁶ Fasold now reports that from the consonant clusters in five familiar verbs ending in -st, two verbs in -sk (ask and risk), and one verb in -sp (the unfamiliar clasp), eleven of eighteen children whom he tested in Washington, D. C., left out the stop before the ending -ing in at least one instance.²⁷ He finds it "even more startling" that most of the children who had any stop at all in the clusters in risking and clasping had a [t], not a [k] or a [p].²⁸ Adding Wolfram's evidence that some black children in Mississippi also leave out the [t] of "final standard consonant clusters" before suffixes beginning with vowels,²⁹ Fasold concludes

again that "there is a basilectal form of VBE in which final clusters do not exist in the underlying forms, or are limited to final [t] with a few lexical exceptions" like ask;³⁰ and he goes on to a "somewhat speculative" argument that "such a VBE variety would fit well in a reasonable model for the decreolization of Black English."³¹

But this old argument remains questionable. Only one of the children left out the [k] of asking, which Fasold has to classify among his "lexical exceptions"; and similarly he must suggest "errors in performance" to explain why a few of Wolfram's white Mississippi subjects also could drop the [t] from forms like testing.³²

In these -st- participles, the great majority of Fasold's black subjects alternated between forms with and without the [t]. He himself says that loss of the stop "could be the result of assimilation";³³ familiar sources like Atwood's Verb Forms and the OED prove the existence of underlying white forms without the stop by such items as "a pos ["post"] ine his temple" from fourteenth-century Kent, a plural posses "posts" in living British dialects,

and a present singular verb cosses "costs" in Southern American speech today;³⁴ and the alternation of [t] with zero would be supported by past-tense forms with [t] and present forms without it.

Since clasp in Fasold's sentence They are clasping their hands was so unfamiliar to his subjects that five replaced it with clap, risting remains as his principal exhibit. It may be explicable, without reference to decreolization, as typical over-correction. In the -sp / -sɪ / -sk words, children may generalize to underlying forms without the final stop, especially to verb-forms without -[p] and -[k], where the stop is not supported by a past tense with the syllabic ending. When they are told to say wrist not wris' for the body-part, they might logically change "the relatively uncommon" verb ris' to rist not risk. But neither this guess nor Fasold's applies either to initial [skr]- in skreet for street³⁵ or to mask for mast,³⁶ which reverses the preference for [t] over [k].

(4) Because speakers of "Vernacular Black English" are reported as deleting is more often and in more environments than even working-

class white Southern rustics, Fasold suggests "that absence of to be forms in VBE represents the remnants of the earlier creole," while among white Southerners many delete are because "their speech is 'r-less'" and less numerous others delete is by generalization from the deleted are and "from contact with VBE speakers."³⁷ But (again) interdialectal differences in the generality of application of shared rules need not be explained by invoking decreolization.

(5) In his argument from distributive be, Fasold has to maintain that those Southern whites who "have learned something about it" have learned from blacks;³⁸ without analysis, he dismisses the evidence from British dialects;³⁹ and following Rickford,⁴⁰ he says of distributive be in Anglo-Irish just that it "quite possibly played a role in the development of the form in VBE."⁴¹ That statement weakens the opposition between creolists and dialectologists and invites repetition of Rickford's call for "far more careful attention to historical and demographic detail than has been the practice up till now."⁴²

Fasold's arguments, in summary, are neither the worst nor the best which have been offered for a creole history and consequent distinctiveness of "Vernacular Black English," but perhaps his own sense of the quality of his material appears when he acknowledges the limits of the evidence yet keeps the creolist inference: "decreolization . . . seems to have progressed so far as to have obliterated most of the original creole features."⁴³

Examples of over-confidence among self-styled creolists are more easily found in Dillard's Perspectives and his revision of Marckwardt. The Marckwardt revision unfortunately offers general readers controversial or flatly mistaken creolist conclusions as if they were established. Examples include (a) the asymmetrical treatment of the diphthongs of house and bite in the account of the Great Vowel Shift--a treatment apparently motivated by a reference to Sranan Tongo and "the seventeenth-century maritime pronunciation";⁴⁴ (b) the suggestion that nonstandard hign, etc., do not "represent a preservation of linguistically older forms" but instead are somehow innovations, to which "Pidgin English . . . may

have contributed something";⁴⁵ and (c) the flat statement that "Black English negative concord" is unparalleled in "older English."⁴⁶ Crawford Feagin, of course, has found negative concord "across clause boundaries" in white speech in present-day Anniston, Alabama;⁴⁷ and linguistic historians have catalogued similar phenomena in Old, Middle, and Early Modern English:

OE: Hī nyllap geswīcan ꝥæt hī oðre men ne reāfigen.⁴⁸

Hē forbēad him ꝥæt hit ne scolde suā weorðan.⁴⁹

ME: Hwa nat þet Domesdei nis þe dei iset to don riht
alle men?⁵⁰

EMnE: You may deny that you were not the cause.⁵¹

A more significant example of over-confidence is Dillard's treatment of the verb meddle "copulate with" in a seventeenth-century account of a supposed speech by the Indian, King Philip. King Philip is represented as complaining, "Me meddle Squaw me hang'd." The OED cites this use of meddle, which is commonplace in Middle English, as late as 1655; but Dillard places the use "in the pidgin English tradition" and quotes a fanciful etymology which William A.

Stewart based on a use of middle in a twentieth-century "blues lyric."⁵²

Such eagerness in error invites scepticism, not agnosticism; but a better model than either negativity or seventeenth-century Enthusiasm is Kurath's learned but tentative inquiry into "British Sources of American Pronunciation."⁵³ "I am well aware," Kurath concluded, "of the tentative nature of my suggestions. I hope that they may stimulate others to follow them up and to gather further evidence that may lead to firm conclusions."

Argument 1. Writing in 1969, with the support of the Center for Applied Linguistics, the Ford Foundation, the Carnegie Corporation, and the U. S. Office of Education, Ralph Fasold described his and Wolfram's essay on the "features of Negro dialect" as written from the viewpoint of bidialectalism (then newly christened biloquiamism) and intended as one part of an answer to "the question of what to

do about nonstandard English."⁵⁴ In 1980 the New New Wave is John Simon addressing the MLA, and the sound of the grantsmen is low as they search for a more rewarding rhetoric.

Without embarrassing reference to the unbeneficed who said when bidialectalism was invented that it must fail (as now it has), Fasold today acknowledges the educational failure of the white exploiters of Black English: "We have lived through ten or fifteen years of intensive attention to VBE in education with precious little to show for it in terms of educational advancement."⁵⁵ He even asserts that "it's time to look elsewhere than in purely linguistic differences" for the causes of the difficulty which many black youngsters face in their "language arts education."⁵⁶

It's time? It's a hundred years past time. But Fasold is essentially unrepentant. Where is his "elsewhere"? One might hope that it would be in some facts of American life as Goneril arrives to justify what Carter tolerated. For example:

In August of this year, 37.4% of blacks between 16 and 19 were unemployed as compared with 17% of whites in the same age group. Among blacks between 20 and 24, 22% were unemployed as compared with 10% of whites. . . . The rate of unemployment among black youth worsens, comparatively, the more education blacks have. . . . For high school dropouts, 31.6% of blacks were unemployed as compared with 16.4% of whites. Of black high school graduates, 21.3% were jobless as compared with 8.5% of whites. Of black college graduates, 17.1% were unemployed as compared with 4% white.⁵⁷

Black children will learn better when the conditions of their lives give them a better chance and more secure rewards for learning.

Ralph Fasold's proposal, on the other hand, will do nothing much for blacks but something at least for grantsmen. "Linguists and anthropologists," he writes, "still have a contribution to make toward the solution" of the problem of poor reading by black children, "but most likely in the study of interaction rules, patterns of conversational strategy and learning styles."⁵⁸ Reading his last sentence, one might imagine that it was not he and Wolfram

who spent so much time on the pronunciation of Black English-- that they only "lived through" the rise and fall of the Black English industry and were not themselves industrialists. "I would expect," says Fasold, condescendingly, that "research on the ethnography of communication" would "lead to better results in improving education for minorities than continuing to worry about deleted copulas and the homophony between pin and pen."⁵⁹

From black-white speech relationships to the ethnography of communication, state-supported schools have supported the state by chalking the face of Black English and promising "upward mobility in the mainstream culture" to the oreos; and state-supported research has not changed the state but has rewarded the researchers. If we truly want justice for all, we must either accept frustration or must change the visibly divided indivisible state to which we pledge allegiance.

Notes

¹From the description of a "workshop" in the "1981 Convention Preview" of the Conference on College Composition and Communication.

²Though I was listed among the "discussants" of Fasold's paper, I finally withdrew because he did not send it in time for adequate preparation. I am told by Professor Juanita Williamson that some other panelists were kinder to the paper than I would have been.

³Albert H. Marckwardt, American English, 2nd ed., rev. J. L. Dillard (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980).

⁴J. L. Dillard, ed., Perspectives on American English (The Hague: Mouton, 1980).

⁵James Sledd, "Biloquialism," English Studies Today, Sixth Series, pp. 113-114.

⁶Fasold, p. 1.

⁷P. 3.

⁸Carroll E. Reed, Dialects of American English, rev. ed. (University of Massachusetts Press, 1977), ^{p.} 77.
Fasold, [^]

⁹P. 3.

¹⁰P. 4.

¹¹Pp. 8-12.

¹²Specifically, the neutralization of high and mid lax front vowels before nasals, "the vocalization and deletion of post-vocalic [r]," "the perhaps less common vocalization and deletion of [ɪ] in similar environments," a (not an) and [ɔ] (not [ɔɪ]) before vowels, the final alveolar not velar nasal in present participles, alveolar stops for initial interdentals, labiodental fricatives for the interdentals medially and finally, "the deletion of word-final stops," nonstandard forms of irregular past tenses and past participles, "absence of concord with finite forms of be," ain't, it for expletive there, "completive done," "double modals," "auxiliary inversion in indirect questions," deletion of relative pronouns as subjects, "negative concord," "negative preposing."

¹³Ralph W. Fasold and Walt Wolfram, "Some Linguistic Features of Negro Dialect," in Ralph W. Fasold and Roger W. Shuy, eds., Teaching Standard English in the Inner City (Washington: Center for Applied Linguistics, 1970), pp. 41-86.

Fasold,

¹⁴Pp. 13-15.

¹⁵Pp. 15-18.

¹⁶Pp. 18-22.

¹⁷Pp. 22-27.

¹⁸Pp. 27-31.

¹⁹Pp. 31-34.

²⁰Pp. 78-79, 152-153.

²¹Joseph Wright, The English Dialect Grammar (Oxford, 1905),
p. 265.

²²Harold Orton, et al., The Linguistic Atlas of England (London:
Croom Helm, 1978).

²³Martyn F. Wakelin, English Dialects, rev. ed. (London: Athlone
Press, 1977), p. 111.

²⁴American Speech 51 (1976): 185-200.

²⁵Fasold, p. 22.

²⁶Walt Wolfram and Ralph W. Fasold, The Study of Social Dialects
in American English (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall,
1974), pp. 129-134.

²⁷Fasold, pp. 23-25.

²⁸Pp. 24-25.

²⁹Pp. 26-27.

³⁰P. 25.

³¹P. 26.

³²Ibid.

³³P. 27.

³⁴OED, s.v. post; E. Bagby Atwood, A Survey of Verb Forms in the Eastern United States (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1953), p. 28.

³⁵Wolfram and Fasold, Study of Social Dialects, p. 144.

³⁶D. M., examination in E.306.29860, UT Austin, 12/16/80.

³⁷Fasold, pp. 30-31.

³⁸P. 34.

³⁹P. 32.

⁴⁰John R. Rickford, "The Insights of the Mesolect," in David DeCamp and Ian F. Hancock, eds., Pidgins and Creoles (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 1974), pp. 106-110.

⁴¹Fasold, p. 32.

⁴²Rickford, p. 110.

⁴³Fasold, p. 4.

⁴⁴P. 17.

⁴⁵Pp. 151-152.

⁴⁶P. 153.

⁴⁷Crawford Feagin, Variation and Change in Alabama English (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 1979), pp. xiii, 229.

⁴⁸Bosworth-Toller, s.v. ne.

⁴⁹Bosworth-Toller, Supplement, s.v. forbeōdan.

⁵⁰J. A. W. Bennett and G. V. Smithers, eds., Early Middle English Verse and Prose, 2d ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), p. 235.

⁵¹Richard III, i.3.90, cited by E. A. Abbott, A Shakespearian Grammar, Dover ed. (New York: Dover Publications, 1966), p. 295.

⁵²Dillard, Perspectives, pp. 407-408.

⁵³Hans Kurath, "British Sources of Selected Features of American Pronunciation: Problems and Methods," in Harold B. Allen and Gary N. Underwood, eds., Readings in American Dialectology (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1971), pp. 265-272.

⁵⁴Fasold and Shuy, "Preface," Teaching Standard English in the Inner City.

⁵⁵Fasold, p. 40.

⁵⁶Pp. 39-41.

⁵⁷Julius Lester, "The Black 'Lost Generation,'" The Texas Observer, October 17, 1980, p. 23.

⁵⁸Fasold, p. 41.

⁵⁹Ibid.